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Pattern of conferences

Reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The report has been prepared in response to the requests of the General Assembly addressed to the Secretary-General in its resolution 58/250 of 23 December 2003. It focuses on the general aspects of the technical secretariat support and conference services that are provided by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, as well as on the three major projects undertaken by the Department over the past year. It should be examined in conjunction with the report of the Secretary-General on the pattern of conferences (A/59/159).

* A/59/150.

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I. Introduction

1. The reform of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has gone through its second year. On the basis of strategizing, organizational restructuring and project launching in the first year of reform, the Department has made tremendous efforts to optimize, integrate and synchronize the various reform measures and projects, with the aim of achieving full-system benefits.

2. In this process, the Departmental Management Group composed of senior managers provided policy guidance and made strategic decisions through its weekly meetings, which were then operationalized by the Programming Group and the Information and Communications Technology Committee.

3. The experience over the past two years has taught that achieving the improvement of the performance of the Department is much more complicated than envisioning that improvement, not least because of the servicing nature of its operations. On the one hand, the Department must respond to varying and often unpredictable requests from its clients; on the other hand, it has to meet high standards of quality, productivity, timeliness and cost-effectiveness, a combination of criteria that can sometimes be at odds with each other or vie with each other for the finite resources available. This situation is further compounded by the need to balance immediate results against long-term benefits. The Department has therefore worked proactively both upstream and downstream to enhance predictability in requests for its services and to optimize its own performance, while making full use of the potential of information technology.

II. Technical secretariat support

4. Proactive technical secretariat support is not just conducive to the smooth and efficient conduct of the work of intergovernmental bodies, but also crucial to the effective management of conference services.

A. Revitalization of the General Assembly

5. The Department has been particularly active in contributing to the revitalization of the General Assembly through its support to the President of the fifty-eighth session of the Assembly and the work of the open-ended General Committee.

6. The Department has been closely consulted regarding, and heavily involved in, all of the President's efforts, providing not just technical secretariat assistance, but more substantive support, most notably through the preparation of five extensive conference room papers mandated by resolution 58/126 of 19 December 2003 on the revitalization of the work of the Assembly, particularly in response to the proposals on the improvement of working methods. All of the working papers contain information and proposals that have major implications for conference management. Specifically:

(a) Note by the Secretariat entitled "Options for the rescheduling of the Main Committees of the General Assembly" (A/58/CRP.3) presented three options for a

mock calendar of conferences and meetings that would schedule the work of the Main Committees of the General Assembly over two substantive periods during the session. While this approach could have the largest impact for conference management, further negotiation will be required in future sessions to achieve consensus;

(b) Note by the Secretariat entitled "Illustrative agenda of the General Assembly" (A/58/CRP.4) aligned the items of the agenda according to the priorities of the medium-term plan of the Organization for the period 2002-2005. It further suggested ways in which such an illustrative agenda could fit into and contribute to the larger scheme of initiatives being developed. This clustering of agenda items is expected to better focus the work of the Assembly and enhance the utilization of conference-servicing resources. The provisional agenda and the programme of work of the fifty-ninth session of the Assembly will reflect this approach as approved by the Assembly;

(c) Note by the Secretariat entitled "Historical and analytical note on the practices and working methods of the Main Committees" (A/58/CRP.5) provided detailed analyses of the working methods of all the Main Committees, and presented a broad range of recommendations on their best practices and working methods. The early establishment of the programmes of work by the Main Committees will enhance planning for conference management;

(d) Note by the Secretariat entitled "Analysis of the agenda of the General Assembly" (A/58/CRP.6) contained detailed information on the origin of all of the 333 agenda items and sub-items treated by the General Assembly, their frequency of deliberation, the body or bodies to which they were assigned, and the number of meetings and resolutions devoted to them, as well as the most recent session in which they had been considered. The Member States found this paper very useful in contextualizing the agenda overall and the items in particular. The implementation of the proposal therein would also contribute to the further biennialization, triennialization, clustering and elimination of items in the customary agenda of the Assembly;

(e) Note by the Secretariat entitled "Control and limitation of documentation" (A/58/CRP.7) responded to the request by Member States to control and limit documentation. Implementation is already under way, and annual updates will be provided as requested by the General Assembly.

7. Thanks to the close, continuous and constructive collaboration among the Department, the President of the General Assembly and the General Committee, the particularly productive pursuit of an unusually broad range of revitalization issues has become a hallmark of the fifty-eighth session. As a result, the Assembly adopted resolution 58/316 of 1 July 2004, which will have lasting impact on the working methods and, ultimately, the efficiency and effectiveness, of the Assembly. It could also have very significant implications for the way in which technical secretariat support and conference services are provided.

B. Reform of the working methods of the Main Committees

8. Of all the revitalization initiatives outlined above, those relating to the work of the Main Committees may require the most extensive efforts and attention from the

Member States in forthcoming sessions of the General Assembly if they are to come to fruition. It is hoped that two of the above conference room papers, namely, A/58/CRP.3 and A/58/CRP.5, will provide assistance in the consultations.

9. In the interim, however, a number of concrete steps have already been taken by the Member States and the Secretariat to facilitate the work of the Main Committees. For the first time, the Chairpersons and all the members of the Bureaux of the Main Committees of the fifty-ninth session were elected three full months prior to the opening of the session. This will surely facilitate the planning and organization of the work of the Main Committees. Similarly, provisional programmes of work for all Main Committees were circulated four months ahead of the opening of the General Assembly. In addition to providing the Member States with information on the schedule for the consideration of agenda items, this advance planning is conducive to the operation of the slotting system instituted by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, thus promoting the timely issuance of documents.

10. Clearly, as technical secretariat support is upstream of conference management, its rationalization in the context of the revitalization of the General Assembly will contribute significantly to the improvement of conference management.

III. Conference management

11. Effective management of the provision of conference services is a major focus of the reform.

12. The work of the Department is mostly derived from the calendar of conferences and meetings of the United Nations. Meetings produce and require documents and, in turn, often take place depending on the availability of documents. Therefore, the operational activities in this field fall into two major categories: meetings management and documentation management, the former being supported by e-Meets and the latter by e-Docs.

13. There is no doubt that technology is a crucial building block of the reform. The departmental information technology (IT) strategy, therefore, has been closely aligned with and supportive of the programmatic goals. The implementation of the IT projects, on its part, has also been results-oriented, with particular emphasis on ensuring that operational needs are addressed effectively through project development, timely procurement and installation of equipment as well as monitoring of the return on investment.

A. Meetings management

14. E-Meets has now been in operation for over a year to manage the calendar of conferences and meetings. This in-house-designed and -developed electronic meetings management system was first deployed in January 2003 and has been under constant development ever since.

15. Once fully developed, e-Meets will become the central mechanism that covers and integrates the whole spectrum of meetings-related activities and will increase

the overall effectiveness, efficiency and quality of the provision of conference services by:

- Enabling the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to undertake the global planning of conference services and the scheduling and monitoring of the provision of services at individual duty stations.
- Providing clients with a faster and more convenient channel for requesting services.
- Disseminating real-time meetings-related information electronically, through electronic bulletin boards, the scrolling list on United Nations Television, and United Nations Internet/Intranet, as well as individualized computer screens outside each and every conference room.
- Providing structured, up-to-date and searchable information on all United Nations organs, sessions and meetings, including electronic profiles of United Nations organs and their entitlements to specific meeting services, through an online database.
- Serving as an analytical tool to generate reports and statistics on meetings servicing.

16. Meetings-related service requests by the Secretariat at Headquarters are now made, approved and programmed through e-Meets. Starting from August 2004, access has been provided for permanent missions in New York and United Nations programmes and organizations to request services online. In a further attempt to achieve full-system benefits, servicing units outside of Department for General Assembly and Conference Management, such as technical service providers, audio-video service providers, the Special Events Unit and the Security and Safety Service of the Office of Central Support Services, are all linked to e-Meets.

17. Also, as the central depository of meetings servicing information covering the calendar of conferences and meetings, e-Meets will be implemented at or linked with systems in the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. This issue has been the subject of much discussion among the four duty stations, and the system has already been implemented at the United Nations Office at Nairobi.

B. Documentation management

18. In order to alleviate the chronic documentation problem, the Department has adopted a three-pronged approach.

- Control and limitation of documentation.
- Implementation of the slotting system for documentation forecasting and planning to improve submission.
- Internal adjustments in documentation management to ensure timely processing.

19. These measures are intended to clarify and enhance the responsibility and accountability of all the parties involved in the preparation and processing of documents so as to improve the timely issuance of documents for the deliberations of intergovernmental and expert bodies.

1. Control and limitation of documentation

20. In its resolution 58/126 on the revitalization of its work, the General Assembly recognized that the heavy volume of documentation should be reduced and requested the Secretary-General to make proposals for the consolidation of reports on related subjects. In its resolution 58/250 of 23 December 2003 on the pattern of conferences, the Assembly noted that reports not originating from the Secretariat comprise the bulk of the documents issued and requested the Secretary-General to examine ways and means to achieve compliance with the relevant guideline on page limits. In its agreed conclusions 2002/1,[1] the Economic and Social Council had called for further efforts to ensure greater overall coherence among the reports requested and to streamline its documentation (para. 21 thereof).

21. The Secretariat, on its part, has responded to each of the above-mentioned requests and proceeded with the control and limitation of documentation by seeking reduction, where appropriate, in the quantity, as well as the length and frequency of reports requested by the intergovernmental machinery, by consolidating such reporting requests, and by strictly enforcing page limits through both requiring formal waiver requests from heads of author departments for over-limit reports originating in the Secretariat, and issuing drafting guidelines for reports prepared and/or compiled by the Secretariat but not totally within its purview (for more details, see document A/59/159 on the pattern of conferences). Document A/58/CRP.7, inter alia, contained (a) further measures suggested for the Economic and Social Council machinery; (b) proposed consolidation of reports for the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly; and (c) drafting guidelines for reports not totally within the purview of the Secretariat (annexes I, II and III, respectively).

22. The schedule of documentation for the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly has been prepared taking into account both the consolidation of reports and the drafting guidelines which were circulated to all heads of Department of the Secretariat. The interdepartmental task force, to be convened by the Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management, will constantly review the progress made and the level of adherence to the various guidelines and page limits.

23. It must be noted that some of the above measures go beyond the authority of the Secretariat, and depend largely for their success on the efforts made by the intergovernmental bodies. An obvious case in point is reducing reporting requests, which precedes the entire documentation process. Another example is adherence to the drafting guidelines at the intergovernmental level, as more than half of the total workload is beyond the control of the Secretariat. The General Assembly, in its resolution 53/208 B of 18 December 1998, stressed the need for compliance with the existing page limits and invited all intergovernmental bodies to consider, where appropriate, the possibility of further reducing the length of their reports to 20 pages. It is believed that a strengthened recommendation on this from the Assembly could lead to greater adherence to the guidelines.

2. e-Docs

24. E-docs has been envisaged as an electronic documentation management system encompassing the entire documentation process, from submission by author departments, through editing, referencing, translation and text-processing, all the way to printing and, to some extent, distribution. At present, it consists mainly of

the slotting mechanism for the submission of documents, e-DRITS for tracking progress in processing, e-flow (previously named "e-Conveyor") for the electronic transmission of documents through the processing chain, and printing on demand for cost-effective distribution. At a later stage, e-processing, or the electronic processing of documents, which is much more complex and difficult, will be gradually introduced. In a nutshell, e-Docs will integrate all of the existing and future systems related to documentation.

(a) Submission and issuance

25. The underlying premise of the slotting system is that more accurate programming and monitoring of manuscript submission by author departments would enhance predictability of workload, enable better planning and utilization of the processing capacity by the Department, and ultimately lead to more timely issuance of documents in accordance with the existing rules.

26. Starting from 2004, the Secretariat has expanded the slotting system to cover all the pre-session documents of the intergovernmental bodies and has been strictly enforcing this. The slotting schedule for the first half of 2004 came out in early December 2003, and the slotting schedule for the second half came out in early June 2004, giving ample time to the author departments to submit documents within established deadlines. Furthermore, both schedules were finalized through extensive consultations with the author departments.

27. Clearly, compliance with the six-week rule for the issuance of documents as mandated by the General Assembly remains the final goal. However, its full achievement can occur only over time as both the Secretariat and intergovernmental bodies gradually adapt and adjust the way in which they operate. In preparation for this, the Department has at this stage focused on the interim but more practical goal of issuing documents at least four weeks before they are due for consideration by intergovernmental bodies.

28. The following comparison between the main part of the fifty-seventh session and that of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly illustrates how the slotting system can lead to a significant improvement in the timely submission of documents. Together with the comparison between the first half of 2003 and that of 2004, it seems to indicate a trend of improvement in the timely issuance of documents.

For the main part of the fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth sessions of the General Assembly:

Fifty-eighth session

Total slotted pre-session documents	347
Timely submission	201 (58 per cent)
Timely issuance (four weeks)	216 (62 per cent)

Fifty-seventh session

Total slotted pre-session documents	414
Timely submission	138 (33 per cent)
Timely issuance (four weeks)	206 (50 per cent)

For the periods 1 January-30 June 2003 and 1 January-30 June 2004

	2003	*2004*
Total slotted pre-session documents	475	468
Timely submission	318 (67 per cent)	293 (63 per cent)
Timely issuance		
Four weeks	243 (57 per cent)	311 (69 per cent)
Six weeks	163 (37 per cent)	180 (40 per cent)

29. To make the most of the slotting system, a database incorporating the slotting schedule was put in place in late December 2003 to provide an up-to-date week-by-week forecast of documentation for the next six months, so that all processing units of the Department could check the volume of the incoming workload at any time. In future, when the forecast is fully refined, it could even assist in planning the staffing level of the various language services.

30. Despite all the advantages of the slotting system as an effort of the Secretariat to introduce order into the sometimes chaotic documentation situation, it is appropriate to note that it does not and cannot cover all the documents processed by the Department. Documents such as communications from Member States, draft resolutions and draft decisions, as well as certain force majeure documents, are not realistically subject to any forward planning, and will continue to impact on the timely issuance of documents submitted within the slotted time.

(b) Processing

31. The crucial link between submission and issuance is processing within the Department, for which the relevant General Assembly resolutions on the control and limitation of documentation established a general working framework of four weeks. While fully aware that electronic processing holds the key to alleviating the documentation situation (see document A/58/213), the Department has targeted e-flow, namely, the electronic delivery of documents, as the first essential step. It has vigorously developed and tested an electronic flow of documentation, put in place all the necessary hardware and software, and stepped up IT training for the staff.

32. Through much trial and error, e-flow has become operational on a limited scale for some submitting departments and some of the processing units within the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. It presupposes electronic submission of documents by author departments and electronic

transmission of documents through the processing chain. The first round of testing of the mechanism demonstrated that, though promising, the system was much more complicated than expected and needed to be further improved in light of operational requirements before it could be fully relied upon as the main transmission system within and outside the Department. As a result, the system will undergo further adjustment through a series of testing planned for next year.

33. Throughout the test period of e-flow, the introduction of new working methods in some areas, and adjustments to the slotting system, close to 60 per cent of pre-session documents were processed within the four-week time frame established by relevant resolutions. This is particularly encouraging when seen together with the major changes in processing and bearing in mind that statistics on the issuance of documentation show an overall improvement (see table above).

34. The actual electronic processing of documents, which is the ultimate goal, will take longer to achieve, as it would involve, inter alia, a more advanced transmission system, better software and stronger IT skills on the part of all staff. However, once in place, it is expected to yield greater full-system benefits.

(c) Printing on demand

35. Printing on demand (PoD) is at the end of the electronic work flow and serves to maximize its impact. Since late 2003, high-speed digital printing equipment has been in operation at Headquarters to perform initial distribution functions and has already yielded some tangible benefits, such as the reduction of 13 staff members and a reduction in paper usage worth $5,000 per month.

36. In addition, progress has been registered in terms of secondary distribution: the document counter used to distribute hard copies of documents to Secretariat staff has been closed and the staff demand for hard copies of parliamentary documentation is now met through web-based ordering; and the document counter for the distribution of hard copies of documents to delegates is now equipped with high-speed networked printers that can print on demand. All in all, reduction in secondary distribution of documents in hard copies has allowed more cost-effective operations and better space management.

37. A study on PoD has been completed with the assistance of an external consultant. Chief among the recommendations are using PoD for publications, as well as expanding the implementation of PoD through further structural changes in the relevant work units and additional annual investment. In the next annual cycle starting from September 2004, for example, in order to take full advantage of PoD for publications as well as for parliamentary documentation, an annual amount of $744,000 is expected to be used to lease two monochrome digital printers with online perfect binding capability and two sheet-fed colour digital printers. This will be offset by savings in staffing and materials amounting to $1,059,784. The annual net savings will therefore be $315,784.

C. Major projects undertaken

38. As mandated by the General Assembly, the Department has conducted three major studies over the past year, with significant results and findings. It should be noted that the studies represent but the beginning of an ongoing and evolving process.

1. Integrated global management

39. Over the years, the General Assembly has requested the Secretary-General to ensure that conference services are managed in an integrated manner at all duty stations (Assembly resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, para. 81), to ensure a comprehensive dialogue and coordination between the Department and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi, with advice from the Office of Internal Oversight Services, for the enhancement of global management (resolution 57/283 B of 15 April 2003, sect. II.B, para. 9) and to conduct a comprehensive study of the integrated global management, in consultation with the Office of Internal Oversight Services and with the full participation of all duty stations in a collaborative and consultative process, with a view to reaching conclusions that were both practical and comprehensive (resolution 58/250, sect. II.B, para. 6).

40. In fulfilment of the mandate conferred upon it by the General Assembly, the Department embarked on a two-year project on integrated global management of conference services. It enlisted the assistance of Office of Internal Oversight Services consultants, who conducted extensive consultations with conference-servicing staff at all levels at United Nations Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi, and prepared a comprehensive report outlining the steps to be taken in the pursuit of integrated global management. The report was submitted to the Department in February 2004 and will also feed into a report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services to the General Assembly at its fifty-ninth session.

41. Upon the recommendation of Office of Internal Oversight Services consultants, the Department has taken the following steps:

- Of the nine task forces dealing with issues identified by the four duty stations as crucial elements for integrated global management, five were established in February/March 2004, on harmonization of statistical indicators, budget and finance, contractual services, human resources and client orientation. The remaining four task forces, on information technology, examinations, documentation and publishing, and meetings planning, will be set up at the beginning of 2005.
- A Focal Point was appointed in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management in February 2004 to coordinate the work of the task forces.
- Each task force was chaired by a staff member from one of the duty stations and included representatives from all four duty stations. The Chair of each task force prepared questionnaires on the issues outlined by the Office of Internal Oversight Services consultants, which were then circulated to the members of the task force, and discussed via telephone and e-mail. On the basis of those discussions, the Chairs prepared their respective reports for submission to the Fifth Coordination Meeting of Conference Managers.

42. The whole exercise was heavily results-oriented. The purposes were twofold: to reach agreement on and find solutions to the issues involved and, as the end result, to finalize a manual of policies, practices and procedures of conference services covering all the major operational, financial and personnel issues, one that all duty stations would agree and adhere to.

43. As the culmination of the first phase of the project, the Fifth Coordination Meeting of Conference Managers, which was opened by the Deputy Secretary-General, was held in New York from 12 to 15 July 2004. It consisted of three segments: the working-level segment and plenary, the high-level segment and the regional commissions segment.

44. During the working-level segment, five in-session working groups composed of members of the task forces and their Chairs continued discussion of the issues unresolved thus far. Agreement was reached on most of those issues and reports of the task forces were finalized. The plenary then approved the reports of all the task forces and adopted a set of conclusions on statistical indicators, budget and finance, and contractual services to be included in the manual for immediate implementation across the four duty stations.

45. At the high-level segment, the Under-Secretary-General and Assistant Secretary-General for General Assembly and Conference Management met with the Directors-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Nairobi and the Deputy Director-General of the United Nations Office at Vienna to discuss policy issues related to global management of conference services. They reached agreement on a number of important issues.

46. Finally, a meeting was held with representatives from the regional commissions to discuss the possibility of extending global management to those bodies, and to consider issues of common concern. The regional commissions have traditionally participated in the Coordination Meetings. Although not included in the General Assembly's mandate on global management or covered by the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services, their participation in the global management project could help to further rationalize the use of resources across duty stations.

47. Now that the foundations have been laid for full implementation of a global management approach to conference services, the Department will place emphasis on the implementation of results and the monitoring of progress.

2. Study on workload standards and performance measurement

48. In response to requests by the General Assembly in resolutions 56/242 of 24 December 2001, 57/283 B and 58/250, and as part of the Department's ongoing reform efforts, a Task Force on Workload Standards and Performance Management was established in July 2003, with broad participation from United Nations Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva, the United Nations Office at Vienna and the United Nations Office at Nairobi. The Task Force thoroughly reviewed the origins and purposes of the existing workload standards for conference-servicing staff, and sought to establish the impact of the introduction and utilization of various new technologies and working methods on the performance of staff in the conference-servicing area.

49. In the course of its study, the Task Force became convinced that the existing workload standards constituted a rather crude, one-dimensional measure of performance which focused exclusively on quantitative output of individual staff members. While recognizing that workload standards would continue to be needed as a tool for calculating the costs of additional conference-servicing workloads and determining appropriate staffing levels, and as a rough yardstick for evaluating the performance of individual staff members, the Task Force considered that

quantitative standards needed to be applied with flexibility in order to take into account the many variables and factors that affected individual productivity. Workload standards should, moreover, be supplemented by broader and ultimately more meaningful measures of key success criteria, such as user satisfaction with the timeliness, quality and overall cost of conference services. A wider array of indicators, both quantitative and qualitative, would enable managers to obtain a more accurate picture of performance and take more targeted actions to address any problems that might exist in that regard.

50. In addition, the Task Force feared that an exclusive emphasis on the output or productivity of individual staff members might obscure the more significant picture of full-system efficiency gains as a result of the introduction and use of new technology. Indeed, efficiency gains have already manifested themselves in the areas of text-processing and distribution, for example, which have even made possible staff reductions and redeployment. These should be generally recognized as being the result of the full-system approach that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management has been vigorously pursuing.

51. The Task Force found that there had been little serious scrutiny of the assumption that the use of IT tools automatically resulted in increased productivity. As regards editors, translators and interpreters, whose core functions are intellectual and hence not amenable to automation of any kind, the impact of technology is less likely to be reflected in greater speed or output than in greater accuracy and consistency. The potential of computer-assisted translation (CAT) as a productivity tool varies greatly from duty station to duty station, and the staff time required for the creation and alignment of translation memories (TM) should be carefully weighed against the potential efficiency gains.

52. The Task Force also noted that the efforts of the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management to establish total e-flow and e-processing of documentation were still at a relatively early stage. While the same basic functions must be performed many of the individual tasks involved are being carried out in different ways as a result of IT, or, in some cases, by different staff. Job content is evolving rapidly in some areas (most notably in text-processing) and is likely to continue to do so with the expanded use of IT applications. At a time when so much within the Department is in flux, with work processes and organizational relationships being re-engineered, it would seem unrealistic to introduce radical changes in the existing workload standards or to expend effort devising quantitative standards for staff for whom they do not currently exist. The dust of the reform should be allowed to settle before major decisions of this kind can be taken. The Task Force believes that more work needs to be done to develop and refine the kind of performance measures that will provide managers in the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management and Member States with a more accurate way of gauging the full-system impact of changes in the way individual units now work as a result of new technology. The Task Force did not feel that it could complete work on the development of such comprehensive indicators in the time allotted to it, nor did it feel that it had the necessary technical expertise for all aspects of this work, but has suggested that it should continue its work in 2005, perhaps enlisting the assistance of the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts as regards financial indicators. It further recommends that the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management should move forward on its own at this stage to develop mechanisms for more systematically tracking user

satisfaction with its products, analysing new developments and specific circumstances affecting the performance of conference-servicing staff, and for the regular exchange of information on workload standards and performance measurement with its partners in the Inter-Agency Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation and Publications. The Task Force believes that by focusing on the overall results achieved by the Department for General Assembly and Conference Management in relation to the financial and staffing resources deployed, rather than on individual productivity in the different conference-servicing units, Member States will be better able to measure the full-system benefits resulting from the ongoing reform efforts pursued by the Department as well as from past and future investments in IT.

3. Summary records

53. United Nations summary records are the official documents of the bodies for which they are produced. They are intended to provide a clear, concise and accurate rendering of the bodies' proceedings. They summarize the views of the speakers and record the decisions taken. They are used by some bodies' secretaries for the preparation of reports. Some members of those bodies, especially those from small delegations, rely on them in drafting reports to their capitals. Finally, summary records remain the official permanent record of the proceedings of certain United Nations bodies and constitute a form of institutional memory.

54. In recent years, however, the utility and cost of summary records have been the subject of considerable debate. Their late issuance as well as their perceived high cost made them the subject of intense scrutiny in the context of the Secretary-General's reform of the Organization, and by the Committee on Conferences and the General Assembly. In resolution 58/250 in particular, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to conduct a thorough cost-benefit study of summary records and to review the list of bodies entitled to them, in full consultation with all relevant intergovernmental bodies, with a view to assessing the need for such records, and to explore the possibility of delivering them in a more efficient and effective manner (sect. II.B, para. 9).

55. For the purpose of the study, the Department has calculated and analysed the cost of providing summary records to the Main Committees of the General Assembly (Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Committees) at its fifty-seventh session, the latest session for which the information available is relatively complete. The analysis confirms that the costs involved in the provision of summary records in all the official languages are high.

56. Several factors have contributed to the current situation. A change in the nature of the deliberations of United Nations bodies, especially the shift towards informal consultations favoured by some of them, accounts for an increasing practice of reading out statements at formal meetings. As a result, there are fewer extemporaneous exchanges and far more prepared statements. At the same time, following the imposition of time limits on interventions, the speakers' rate of delivery has increased substantially, as delegations struggle to pack as much as possible into the time available. Consequently, summary records are longer, and take more time to write, to revise and, once the original is finished, to translate into all six official languages. All of this increases the workload, and the costs involved.

57. Furthermore, the explosion of documentation and publications, the successive reductions in the staffing level of the translation services and the adherence to the principle of simultaneous distribution of summary records in all official languages have also contributed to the delays in the issuance of summary records.

58. Faced with limited resources and a mounting backlog, the Department has taken several measures to expedite the issuance of summary records, including the use of contractual translation and the preparation of a priority list of summary records so that all translation services can follow the same order whenever capacity is available for this purpose. The Department is also studying the viability and cost of off-site translation and précis-writing, which is now made possible by the installation of a digital recording system (NICE) in conference rooms. None of these measures, however, could fundamentally solve the problem. The Department has therefore explored additional alternatives for consideration by Member States to reduce costs, streamline the process and make the provision of the records of proceedings more efficient and effective.

59. The first option had already been suggested by the Department in document A/57/289 and Corr.1, namely, replacing summary records with digital recordings. Some users saw this as a way of achieving an immediate reduction in costs; others, however, thought it had clear disadvantages. It should, perhaps, be noted in this context that as of 1 May 2004, the European Union discontinued the publishing of printed transcripts of its parliamentary debates and has been issuing digital videodiscs (DVDs) of its plenary debates with all sound channels, including both the floor and the interpretations.

60. The second option would be to reduce the number of bodies entitled to summary records. Consultations with intergovernmental bodies have taken place as mandated by the General Assembly to determine whether there are bodies that might be prepared to renounce their entitlements in this regard, particularly in the case of those that have not availed themselves of this service in the last three years. Communications have also been sent to all bodies currently entitled to summary records, asking them to review their requirements and consider the alternative options offered. The Department expected to have their feedback by the end of 2004 so that it could propose the next step.

61. The third option might be to concentrate précis-writing in the English Translation Service, which has the richest experience in précis-writing and is currently handling about 70 per cent of the précis-writing workload. This approach would also, to some extent, reduce delays in the translation of summary records, since all the other Services have greater capacity to translate directly from English, than from Russian, Spanish or even French. However, since the workload is unevenly distributed throughout the year, it would probably be advisable and more economical to expand the précis-writing capacity during peak periods through temporary assistance recruitment rather than through an increase in its permanent capacity. Given the importance the General Assembly attaches to multilingualism, this is also a decision that should be made by Member States. It should be stressed in this context that this proposal is based purely on practical considerations and not intended in any way to give an advantage or preferential treatment to one official language.

62. The fourth option would be to restrict the length of summary records to a predetermined maximum number of words (for example, 5,000 words for a three-

hour meeting). This approach would enable the Department to cut the cost of producing a summary record by over one half. This is a decision that can be made only with the concurrence of Member States, since in some cases, it would cut down the length of summary records by two thirds.

63. The fifth option would be to eliminate publishing and distribution costs if Member States could agree to having access only to electronic versions of summary records for downloading and printing by users, as necessary.

IV. Conclusions

64. In its the second year of implementation, reform has maintained its momentum and become fully integrated into the daily operations of the Department. In this process, the focus has been on integrating and synchronizing the various projects envisioned at the beginning of this round of reform, and achieving synergy and full-system benefits by relying on management and technology. The proposed strategic framework for the period 2006-2007 will ensure the progress of reform in a sustainable way.

65. Looking ahead, the Department will:

- Continue to contribute to the revitalization efforts of the General Assembly as a way, inter alia, of improving upstream planning of conferences. This is crucial to better management of conference services downstream.
- Further develop the functions of e-Meets as the central meetings management tool to cover the entire spectrum of meetings-related activities and expand its application across duty stations.
- Put in place the necessary hardware and software for e-Docs as the central documentation management tool; and, as a start, will complete the improvement of the e-flow system and begin actual electronic transmission of documents through the documentation chain.
- Enhance the cost-effectiveness of using PoD for parliamentary documentation on the basis of experience gained and lessons learned, and begin utilization of PoD for publications.
- Undertake effective follow-up to the comprehensive study on integrated global management, begin to implement policies and measures agreed upon at the last Coordination Meeting, and complete the project in 2005.
- Pursue the study of workload standards and performance measurement with a view to presenting to the General Assembly at its sixtieth session a proposal for a comprehensive methodology for performance measurement and management from a full-system perspective.
- Continue to improve overall performance of the Department, with particular emphasis on quality control and timeliness.

Notes

[1] See document A/57/3 (Part II), chap. V, para. 9, the entire report of the Economic and Social Council for 2002 to be issued in final form as *Official Records of the General Assembly. Fifty-seventh Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/57/3/Rev.1).